iSheffield: Sept 6th'07 THE EUROPEAN FOLK REVIVAL 1760-1914

Mary Neal and the Espérance Club Experiment: Refreshing the Folk Revival Narrative

Action: Pour out glass of lemonade. To sit on table/desk throughout.

I tell the story of the Espérance Club Experiment *and* of its founder, Mary Neal. A cultural and social project set up for working girls in 1895 by Mary and her friend Emmeline Pethick in the notorious London slum area, the Club came to play a pivotal role in the English Folk Revival. This was due I believe to the social circumstances out of which it grew and Mary's pioneering work as a radical arts practitioner.

In the telling, I seek to understand how such an exciting story has come to be, written out of history. To borrow Mary's own words: "I want to tell the story as it has not yet been told and as it never will be told unless I tell it"[1]

My paper examines what is currently known of the Espérance Club to redress this lack, and to refresh the English folk revival narrative of the early 20th century. A revival, in the words of Mary's colleague Emmeline, that, "blazed up throughout the countryside". "It was' she wrote "as though a match had been applied to furze on a parched heath". [2]

[1] Mary Neal, As A Tale That is Told, Unpublished, In Private Possession, p157.
[2] Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, My Part in A Changing World, (London 1937) p.139

I look firstly at the origins the Club, and then secondly at the dynamics of learning and self-organising at its heart, and the Club's capacity to harness social innovation to cultural innovation, at personal and national levels. It's my belief that the dynamics of the story have been undervalued to date, but can provide current day inspiration for the transformative power of the arts, particularly amongst the young in communities of economic disadvantage. The Mary Neal Project will be exploring these possibilities over the next year or so. I will refer in conclusion to the linguistic anthropologist, Professor Shirley Brice Heath, an expert in the field of youth-based arts organisations today.

First though, who was Mary Neal and how do I her great great neice fit into the picture?

(*apologies for sideways pictures….)*

Image: Half a picture of Mary Neal.

Mary Neal was born Clara Sophia in Birmingham in 1860, the eldest daughter of a moderately prosperous button manufacturer. She describes the Victorian family

life into which she was born, a 'pageant of snobbery'[3]. She read John Stuart Mill at an early age and felt 'a rebel down to the foundations of my life'. Frustrated by a young Victorian girl's life, she leaves for London in 1888 to join the Wesleyan West London Mission in Cleveland St (near the BT post office tower). Overnight, she is a Sister of Mercy, Sister Mary, serving the poor. Grim home visits to the destitute families on her watch, have her holding her throat as she retches in the gutter. The slum dwellings of over crowded central London and grinding poverty became her world. In the 'rough' area of Fitzrovia and Soho she makes a success of the unpopular task of running the social club for young girls. Dodging dead cats and furniture being thrown into the Club she's joined by fellow radical Emmeline Pethick (later Pethick Lawrence). They were to become life-long friends.

Never complete or fully in focus, Mary is always present in the larger frame of the English Folk Revival. In London, Thaxted, Cambridge, Stow, Abingdon, Cumbria, Yorkshire, Somerset and so on for over 40 years. In her life overall, the canvas broadens to include the Miners' strikes, the Home Office, Holloway Prison, taking the minutes of the first WSPU meeting in Sylvia Pankhurst's flat and later on a Sussex county bench.

The impact of her appearances appears consistent. She is a harnessed, pragmatic, energetic and generous character. Her values are inclusive, though

[3] Mary Neal, As A Tale That is Told, Unpublished, In Private Possession, p157.

you wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of her wit. A social reformer, a labour party pioneer, a suffragette, and a folk revivalist, her personal was political. Her vision for social justice and the transforming power of the arts went hand in hand. She had a passion for rhythm and natural beauty and a flair for making things happen.

She is however the folk revivalist who 'lost out' to the dominant narrative of her one-time collaborator the song and dance collector Cecil Sharp whose historical record and achievements are considerable. Whilst Sharp prioritised a strict canon for England's traditional dances and songs, Mary identified the impulse and desire in the individual dancer *to dance* as a pre-requisite of a continuing tradition. Both approaches, characateured as inclusivity versus exclusivity, serve the complex aspects of continuity and change that are the hallmarks of the progression of any cultural tradition, a well-known rift developed between them over participation in the folk dance movement and the differing interpretations of the dance. In the footnotes of this paper however, I refer to lesser-quoted statements by both Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp that serve to show the interchangeability of their views and an exchange of letters demonstrating their personal reconciliations.[4] The narrative of the conflict does not concern me here.

[4] On May 6 1909, **Mary writes to Sharp**:

Attempts to track their differences, have been made elsewhere, most notably by Roy Judge amongst others. [5] Mary's work and the success of the Espérance Club as instigator of the English folk revival can be celebrated in the terms of its own success in its own right and for the perspective gained on the revival. "I feel" said Dr Vic Gammon, from The University of Newcastle's Folk and Traditional Music Studies, to me one day, "that without Mary's whole story, I am always only looking at half the picture of the Folk Revival"[6]

'I am writing on impulse after yesterday because whilst you were talking to those children I was very vividly reminded of the early days of our friendship when I felt we had so much in common that we were sure to be able to work together…I am very grieved at the various misunderstandings that have entered into our work. I came away yesterday inspired by both the successes and the shortcomings, and full of ideas for future development and improvement. After all we have helped one another to make England a more beautiful place for the young folks, the work must go on and it a thousand pities not to do it together". Letter to Sharp. Box 5. Folder A VWML.

And this from Michael Goatcher in Thaxted:

A letter quoted in Maud Karpeles Cecil Sharp, His Life and Work, 1967 edition, from Sharp to Neal, albeit, 12 years later:

"I have not forgotten that you and I started this business together many years ago…nor do I forget the pleasant way in which for the first few years we worked together. It is true that afterwards we found it necessary to part company owing to a difference of opinion, which I am quite sure was as sincere on your part as it was on mine. Nevertheless I prefer to dwell on the period when we co-operated and to relegate to the back of my mind the subsequent happenings". MN wrote a friendly letter in reply.

[5] Roy Judge, Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris, Folk Music Journal 1989, Vol 5, Number 5, p 545-591, (London 1989).

[6] Unpublished conversation

It is at this junction point of being ‘in’ and ‘out’ of history, where dominant and counter-narrative meet, that I place myself today. Can the truths of a counter-narrative, hold keys to refreshing and renewing the dominant narratives in history?

Let’s see.

So, In Come I, as the mummers would say, Lucy Neal. The great great neice of Mary Neal, great granddaughter of her brother Theodore. Of course I want the whole picture of Mary. I’m interested in the Espérance experiment and in trying to understand how it is that certain energies and innovations get written out of history. We know much about William Kimber and his fellow men, but what of dancers Florrie Warren, Blanche Payling, May Start and 100s of other Espérance girls who participated in the Club’s life over 19 years? Can their histories co-exist? In the last year or so I have been meeting people, examining the traces of this story and looking at primary sources. It seems we cannot approach the complex subject of how traditions are renewed and invigorated without a multiplicity of perspectives. As Peter Brook, international theatre director has said, ‘There is my truth, your truth and the truth’.

Image: Whole picture of MN

Some may say, I'm the last person to be able to look at the history of the folk revival with any objectivity. So it may be, but I am the person claiming an interest in the truth of Mary's story, and the truth of her whole story, if only to relay it to my descendants. People refer, sometimes in hushed tones, to the 'spirit' of Mary Neal, and its abiding influence on the folk revival. What is this spirit and what place do spirits have in history? Before I knew anything of Mary, I became a theatre producer, an internationalist and a passionate believer in the transforming power of the arts. This is my other motivation for looking at the story. I feel a synergy between my own beliefs and energies and that of Mary and the

Espérance Club. Maybe looking at the story seeds new openings on the history, allowing the cultural narrative of this time to be refreshed. This glass of lemonade symbolises my attempt, and I shall come to explain how shortly.

First a straightforward technical illustration from the books to demonstrate the writing out of history and the Espérance Club. The first edition of Sharp's The Morris Book (July 1906), co-authored with Mary's Musical Director, Herbert MacIlwaine, is dedicated 'to our friends and pupils, the members of the Espérance Girls Club'. Tribute is paid to Mary for having made the 'venture possible in the beginning' giving it 'reach and strength' that neither authors could have given' [7]. The 2nd edition, published the following year, makes no mention of either Mary nor the Espérance Club, but notes simply that the first edition (which notated dance steps from the Espérance Club dancer, Florrie Warren) had been 'frankly an experiment'. [8]

Sharp was absolutely right. It *had* been an experiment, and one that gave him much to build on. But not the kind of experiment to be airbrushed out as the revival progressed across the land. It is this experiment I'd like to look at, believing it deserves looking at in great depth for signs of the social and cultural innovation it fostered, and retains a contemporary relevance. 100 years on this historic experiment remains inspirational and packed with

[7] Sharp, Cecil J and MacIlwaine, Herbert C: The Morris Book. Novello and Company, London 1906
[8] Sharp, Cecil J and MacIlwaine, Herbert C: The Morris Book. Novello and Company, London 1907

insights for us today about participation in the arts and the dynamics of cross-cultural, intergenerational learning environments centred on the young and the dispossessed. The legacies of such experiments have a viral way of living on in the individuals whose lives they transform. It is not easy to distinguish between the transformations taking place at individual levels and at a wider social level.

Let's return to Mary's arrival in Soho and Fitzrovia in the late 19th century, an area rife with drinking, gambling and prostitution. It was also the base for a large sewing trade, notorious for its exploitation of young women. Many were the stories of women pawning clothes given to sew to feed children, of suicides and appalling dark garrets and sewing workshops. It would have been a challenge for girls to stick with the trade on long hours for a pittance, when others they knew, as prostitutes, wore finer dresses and newer hats.

For reasons explored by Ellen Ross, Prof of History of Ramapo College of New Jersey[9] and also Linda Martz, Assistant Professor of English and History, American University of Paris[10], Mary and Emmeline became increasingly sceptical of the value of the indiscriminate charity they were party to handing out at the West London Mission. 'I doubt' writes Mary honestly 'we ever did any

[9] Prof. Ellen Ross, Christian Love or Social Reform: the Struggles of Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick, Goldsmith's College, University of London, Postgraduate Workshop, March 23 2007

[10] Linda Martz, "Faith in a Single Network: Mary Neal, Emmeline Pethick, and the West London Mission", *Single Women 1000-2000,* Conference of the West of England and South Wales Women's history Network, University of the West of England, June 2006

permanent good to anyone' [11]. Politicised by miners' strikes in Yorkshire, dockers' strikes in the East End, a suffragette movement on the rise, and their own day to day witnessing of the sodden miserable lives of both the deserving and not so deserving poor, they decided a more creative plan for life was needed. Encouraging people's desires, dreams and creativity, they thought, was infinitely preferable to encouraging their immediate and overwhelming needs.

Their fundraising pamphlets for trips to the sea-side for the girls, include animated accounts of these hopes for the girls, and the beginning of the seeds of a new idea. Both Mary and Emmeline talk of 'dreaming the impossible dream'.

'No word can express the passionate longing which I have' writes Mary 'to bring some of the beautiful things in life within easy reach of the girls who earn their living by the sweat of their brow..These Clubs …will be living schools for working women, (and) will be instrumental in the near future, in altering the conditions of the class they represent'. [12]

Emmeline Pethick Lawrence calls the Mission Club, 'a seed-bed of social developments'.[13] There were discussions about minimum wages, prices, the 'land' question, constructive socialism and democracy. Writing in The Associate (a settlement newspaper) Mary says change can be achieved "By the agency of

[11] Mary Neal, As A Tale That is Told
[12] Roy Judge, Mary Neal and The Espérance Morris, p. 581. 4th Annual report.
[13] Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, My Part in a Changing World, p. 86

the Girls' Club" as a "jumping off ground for attack on the system". No wonder they were known as the 'new element'! Not for them the more sedentary activities of other youth clubs, "We made dancing, singing and acting our chief occupations' [14]. In Mother Earth, Mary names the new project:

"We came singing home from the sea, up the river to the little quay where we landed, the 'Song of Hope', from which we named our Club, and which has been ever in our ears"[15]

In 1895, Mary and Emmeline agitate: 'We knew that it was now or never if we meant to do something practical'. [16]. They leave the West London Mission. After a stay down in Somerset they plan their next move. Back in London, they leave their large trunks in the cloak room at Paddington and set off to look for lodgings and work, "just like the servants come up to look for work". [17] They find a 3-roomed flat in a tenement block in Somerset Terrace, Duke's Road, opposite Euston Station. 'Near our old friends amongst the working folk'[18]. They calculate how they will live off £80 a year, putting £1 each into a house keeping box, and paying 14s 6d rent. From here, they invite the girls in for cups of sweet strong tea in front of a small range fire, along with older women turfed out of the nearby workhouses for the day, for whom the public houses on each corner, are the only alternative warm refuge. Learning housekeeping, cookery and cleaning from

[14] Mary Neal, Set to Music.
[15] Mary Neal, Mother Earth
[16] Mary Neal, As A Tale That Is Told, p.74
[17] ibid
[18] Mary Neal, As A Tale That Is Told

the girls themselves, they also bring a grand mix of politicians, poets and philosophers of the day into the flat to join the party: W B Yeats (a neighbour), Edward Carpenter, Keir Hardie, Sylvia Pankhurst, Mrs Havelock Ellis and more besides.

The Espérance Club is established in Cumberland Market, which since 1830 had housed the hay and straw merchants of the Hay Market south of Piccadilly Circus' along with ice coming in from Norway on barges. (David Hayes, Camden Local History).

The Espérance Club was open 4 nights a week from 8-10pm and an evenings' activities included singing, dancing, acting, discussion on topics of the day, a Monday newspaper class, a literary Club, and speeches on Folk lore and art. [19]

The Club remained open for 19 years, closing on the eve of the first World War in 1914, when men and boys were called up, children kept off the streets, and it was no longer possible for them all to meet. Though Emmeline leaves to get married to lawyer husband Fred Lawrence and work on with him on the suffrage movement, Mary stays in the flat for another 13 years, bringing her years in the neighbourhood to a total of 26. (That she stayed alive given the infectious diseases of the area is a miracle in itself.) Many of the girls and their families stayed friends for the rest of her life.

To imagine how the Espérance Club acted as 'a seed-bed for social developments' it is worth getting specific about the realities of the lives of its working girls and the Somerstown slums in which they lived.

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[19] Mary Neal, Set To Music, p11

The Victorians were good at classifying the conditions of the working poor. St Pancras was the most densely populated area of London and The Forty-Fifth Annual Report of the 1900 Medical Office of Health on the Vital and Sanitary Condition of the Metropolitan Borough of St Pancras, pulls no punches in describing the effects of such overcrowding, with sewers ‘just beneath the pavement’, little drainage, houses with no ventilation or entirely ‘shut in’, with 4 or even 5 to a room or mixed up with ‘stables and stalls’.

Mary and Emmeline’s descriptions of conversations with the girls refer to the day to day challenges they faced: long working days, unventilated workrooms, overcrowded homes. One girl is offered a plant to take home but brings it back saying there’s no light at home to grow a plant.

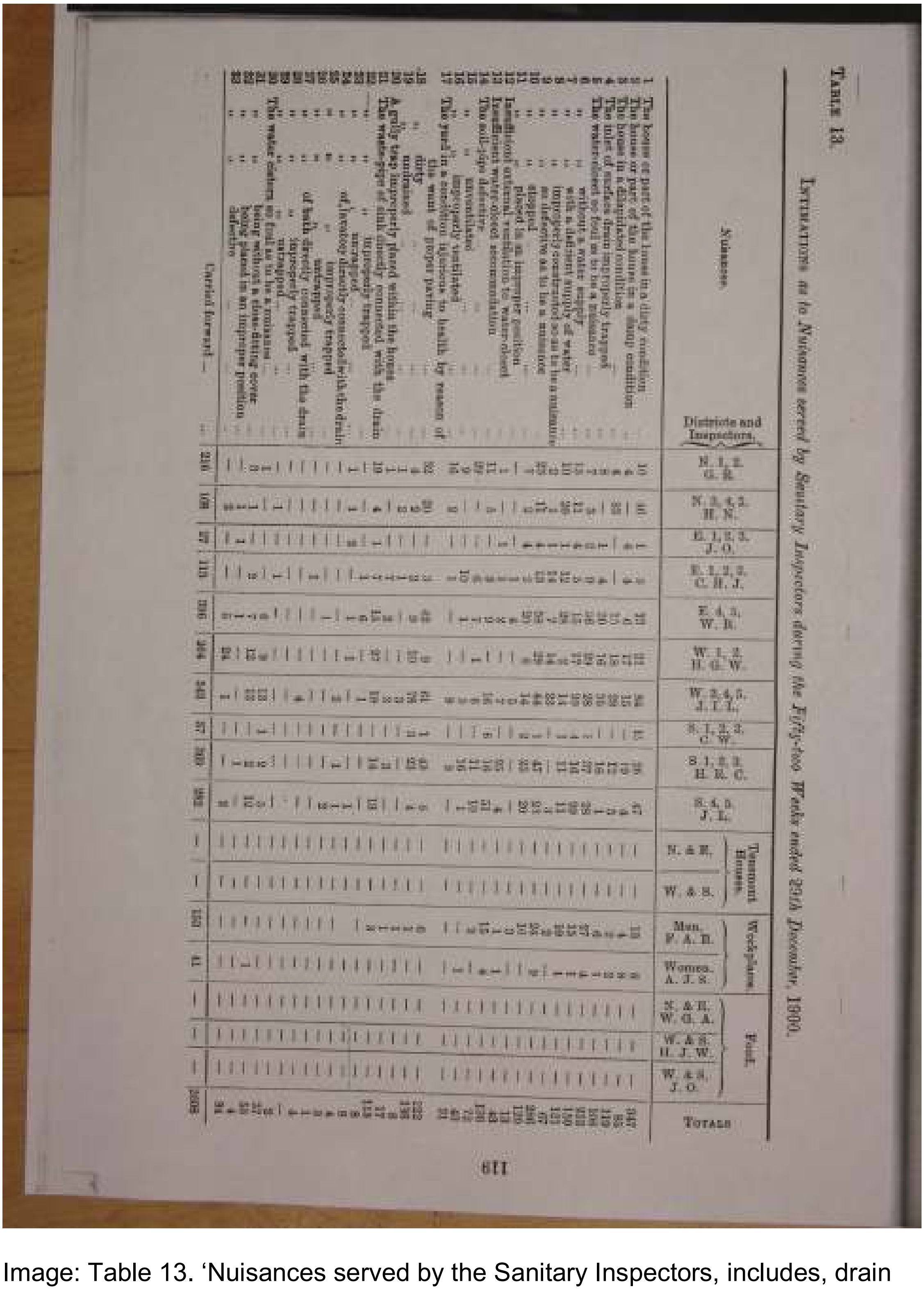
TABLE 13.

INTIMATIONS *as to Nuisances served by Sanitary Inspectors during the Fifty-two Weeks ended 29th December, 1900.*

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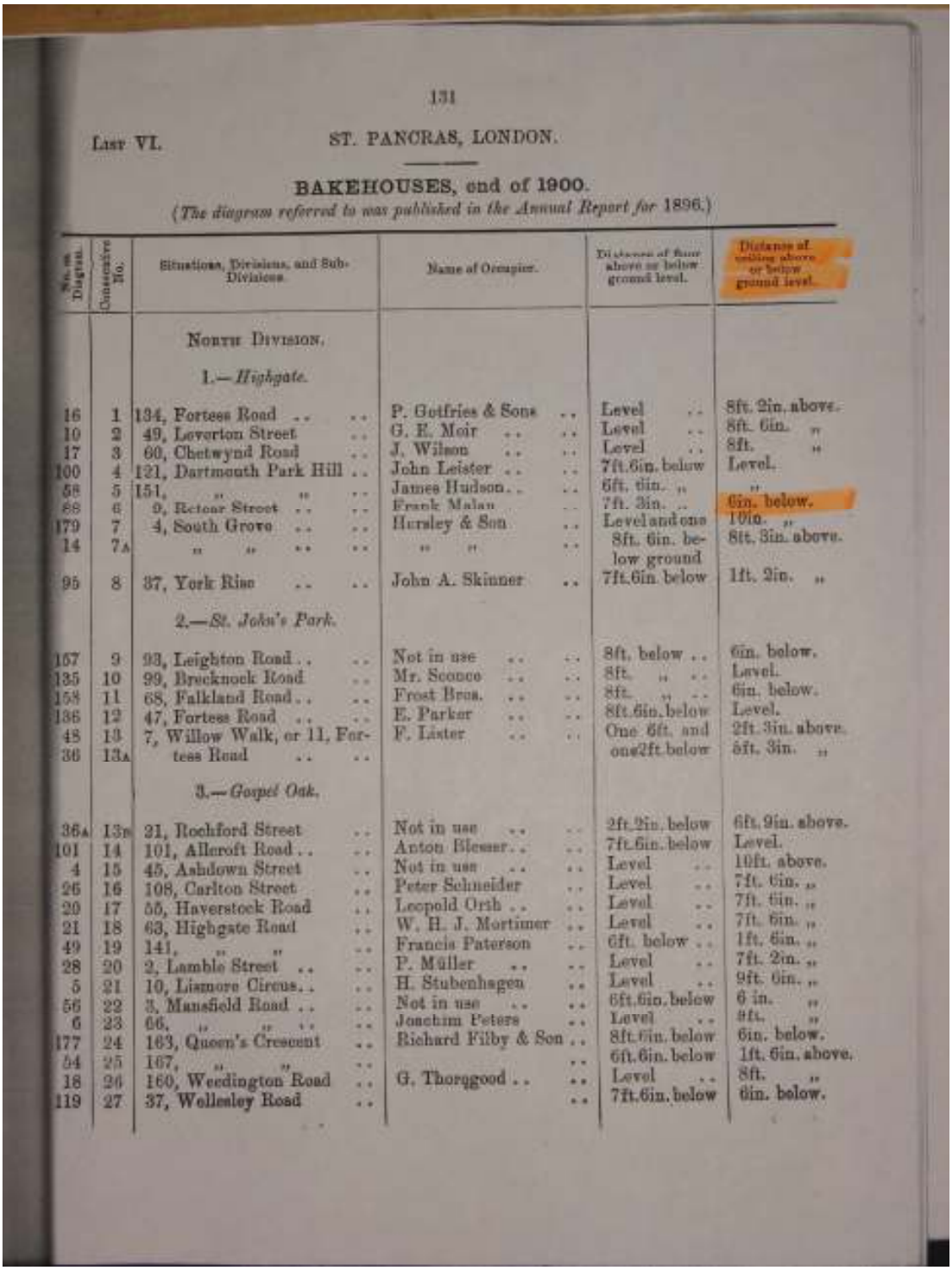
Image: Table 13. ‘Nuisances served by the Sanitary Inspectors, includes, drain

‘foul, defective,

choke



List VI. ST. PANCRAS, LONDON.

BAKEHOUSES, end of 1900.

(The diagram referred to was published in the Annual Report for 1896.)

No. on Diagram.	Consecutive No.	Situations, Divisions, and Sub-Divisions	Name of Occupier.	Distance of floor above or below ground level.	Distance of ceiling above or below ground level.
		NORTH DIVISION.			
		1.—*Highgate.*			
16	1	134, Fortess Road	P. Gotfries & Sons ..	Level ..	8ft. 2in. above.
10	2	49, Leverton Street ..	G. E. Moir	Level ..	8ft. 6in. „
17	3	60, Chetwynd Road ..	J. Wilson	Level ..	8ft. „
100	4	121, Dartmouth Park Hill ..	John Leister	7ft.6in. below	Level.
58	5	151, „ „ ..	James Hudson.. ..	6ft. 6in. „	„
88	6	9, Rctear Street	Frank Malan ..	7ft. 3in. ..	6in. below.
179	7	4, South Grove	Hursley & Son ..	Level and one	10in. „
14	7A	„ „	„ „ ..	8ft. 6in. below ground	8ft. 3in. above.
95	8	37, York Rise	John A. Skinner ..	7ft.6in below	1ft. 2in. „
		2.—*St. John's Park.*			
157	9	93, Leighton Road	Not in use	8ft. below ..	6in. below.
135	10	99, Brecknock Road ..	Mr. Sconce	8ft. „ ..	Level.
158	11	68, Falkland Road	Frost Bros.	8ft. „ ..	6in. below.
136	12	47, Fortess Road	E. Parker	8ft.6in.below	Level.
48	13	7, Willow Walk, or 11, For-	F. Lister	One 6ft. and	2ft. 3in. above.
36	13A	tess Road		one2ft below	5ft. 3in. „
		3.—*Gospel Oak.*			
36A	13B	21, Rochford Street ..	Not in use	2ft.2in. below	6ft.9in. above.
101	14	101, Allcroft Road	Anton Blesser.. ..	7ft.6in. below	Level.
4	15	45, Ashdown Street ..	Not in use	Level ..	10ft. above.
26	16	108, Carlton Street ..	Peter Schneider ..	Level ..	7ft. 6in. „
20	17	55, Haverstock Road ..	Leopold Orth	Level ..	7ft. 6in. „
21	18	63, Highgate Road ..	W. H. J. Mortimer ..	Level ..	7ft. 6in. „
49	19	141, „ „ ..	Francis Paterson ..	6ft. below ..	1ft. 6in. „
28	20	2, Lamble Street	P. Müller	Level ..	7ft. 2in. „
5	21	10, Lismore Circus.. ..	H. Stubenhagen ..	Level ..	9ft. 6in. „
56	22	3, Mansfield Road	Not in use	6ft.6in. below	6 in. „
6	23	66, „ „	Joachim Peters ..	Level ..	8ft. „
177	24	163, Queen's Crescent ..	Richard Filby & Son ..	8ft.6in. below	6in. below.
54	25	167, „ „ ..	..	6ft.6in. below	1ft. 6in. above.
18	26	160, Weedington Road ..	G. Thorgood	Level ..	8ft. „
119	27	37, Wellesley Road ..	.. ..	7ft.6in. below	6in. below.

d, stopped .

Image: P 131. Bakehouses, end of 1900, ‘distance of ceiling above or below ground: 6” below

Charles Booth walked the pavements at night with local policemen, categorising the streets of vermin, drinking, gambling and prostitution that these girls came from are purple, light blue, dark blue, and black. The lowest class needless to say were ‘Vicious, semi-criminal’.

2 Images : Vermin puppets being burned!

35. General Sir Ian Hamilton sets fire. "Save us the wishbone, Farver," yelled one wit

To bring things up to date a bit, the houses in Somerstown were dynamited in 1930 as part of Basil Jellico's St Pancras Housing Association to clear slum

properties. A ceremonial bonfire of models of common pests: bugs, fleas, rats and cockroaches. You wore a hat to keep these vermin out of your hair.

Mary's Somerset Terrace flat and the Espérance Club in Cumberland Market, was a safe harbour for the girls, and a springboard for venturing further afield. She writes after a particularly happy holiday taking the girls out of town:

> …(I) knew the reality of their lives in workshops and factory, knew of the long hours, the poor wages, the unhappy sunless homes, crowded and unsanitary as few of us realise they were thirty years ago, (and) was filled with sadness at the utter insufficiency of all we were trying to do to make things better for them….I was tired of interviewing employers, sitting on Committees, soliciting charity, and the coming winter looked very dark and very hopeless. I longed for some life giving wind which would sweeten these lives and lessen the weariness, some weapon which would conquer the dirt and the dreariness and the muddle in which these city girls lived. I grudged their youth to the industrial machine their health and strength to the toil which brought so few amenities to the worker. More than anything else I think I hated their always having to take and never having anything to give and they as I knew so generous and warmhearted.[20]

She gets to work and in 1906, the girls and Mary are 6 stories up on the roof of Somerset Terrace:

[20] Mary Neal, As A Tale That is Told, p. 138.

Image: Girls on the roof of Somerset terrace with a fiddler practising.

Image: Article from 1906 announcing the girls' public performances at The Queen'sHall

THE DAILY CHRONICLE, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 19

TEACHING MORRIS-DANCE.

Girls' Pretty Performance on House Roof.

THE DAILY CHRONICLE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 4, 1907.

REVIVAL of MORRI DANCING.

This rehearsal for the Queen's Hall in Langham Place was a turning point in the Club's public activities. Each Christmas the Club hosted an annual party, progressing from the conventional cantatas of the day through to more robust Scottish and Irish dancing. Seeking music for English Songs to complete the picture, Mary is recommended by music director Herbert MacIlwaine to make a now well documented visit to seek advice from Cecil Sharp to ask for English songs and later dances. On Sharp's suggestion, Neal travels to Oxford and

invites William Kimber and his cousin to come up to the Club to give dancing lessons to the girls.

The club's semi-public performances caused a stir and interest amongst many high profile guests. Celebratory parties and public concerts, such as those held on April 3rd 1906, can be seen as defining moments in the history of the folk revival, involving Sharp (as lecturer and song collector) amongst others. The girls' low social status, the vigour of their performances and the electic cultural and political mix of those present shifted the perspective of those present about the ownership of England's cultural traditions. The girls were gaining as Sharp himself said 'a spiritual sixth sense' reclaiming a 'lost inheritance'. Though often romantically framed, eye witnesses give accounts. The artist EV Lucas:

"…the idea of a sweet and simple England was intensely vivid, and possibly **one was conscious, too, of the contrast between these songs and the singers themselves – the songs all lucid open-air gaiety, and the singers the members of a club for working girls in the north-western district of this grimy latter-day London..** "Blow away the morning dew" they sang, with all the vigour and happiness that young girls can display, waving their innocent arms as they did so; while one knew that some of them had never seen a dewdrop."[21]

It is conceivable, given how many refugees lived in this quarter of overcrowded London, that there could have been considerable cultural diversity amongst the girls themselves. One critic refers to the 'inevitable Hebraic cast of feature'[22].

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[21] Mary Neal, The Espérance Morris Book, Intro by EV Lucas.
[22] Daily Chronicle, April 4 1906

Somerstown was and still is home to many different peoples and cultures. Mary does not draw attention to this fact herself, and one is left to wonder why not. In attempting to vault over people's fears and inherent prejudices about the working classes, it may have suited her to fall in with all the romance of their being English maidens. Who knows.

A born entrepreneur though, she does witness the social buzz of new interactions at play. Seeing traditional songs and dances being taken up by a socially-excluded, often criminalised younger generation discovering them for the first time, created a cultural renewal, a frisson between new and old.

> 30. "And that night there awoke, after generations of sleep, a little stir of an older life, an older rhythm, an older force, in tune with a simpler life, a sweeter music. And that stir took place as we watched and listened to these workers of the city who sang and danced to the rhythm so long forgotten."
>
> A 'vibration' is set up recognised by many of the artists, writers and musicians present and sensitive to 'this music and rhythm of an older world, a world untouched by machinery and mechanised power but responsive to the vibrant rhythm of sea and wind, earth and stars.' Laurence Houseman, brother of poet, AS Houseman, also present, tells Mary that 'we must not keep such a national possession in the narrow area of a Girls' Club. We must show the country what we had discovered and he prophesied a great revival."[23]

The success of these semi-public performances, triggered invitations for the girls to travel as dance teachers across England. Cultural exchanges buzzed between town and country.

[23] Mary Neal, As A Tale That is Told, p. 146

Between 20 and 30[24] traditional dancers came up to London to teach and innumerable numbers of visits by the girls across the country to both teach and participate in dancing. It's a herculean task to track down who went where when. Margaret Dean Smith, Roy Dommett, Frank Parslow, Clive Carey have made attempts to do so. Roy Judge should be applauded for his success in creating the picture of the revival that he does.

At the Goupil Gallery conference on Nov 14th 1907 Mary mentions that one of her dancers has travelled in one year alone to Wales, Devonshire, Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Berkshire, London, Chelsea, Clevedon, Sussex, Surrey, Kent, Stratford-on Avon, and so on.

With cowsheds, horses stables, sheep, hay markets, abbatoirs, potato sheds and few asphalted roads beneath their feet, the city life of the Espérance girls would not have been cut off from an agricultural world.

[24] In a letter to MDS in 1961 Roy Dommet quotes the Neal/Kidson book of 1915 as having had 20 dancers up to London. They include: William Kimber, Dick Kimber, James Dandridge, J Harwood, J. Trafford, M. COx, (Headington); William and James Hemmings (Abingdon), Sam Bennett (Ilmington), 42. Charles Taylor (Oddington), Thomas Cadd (Yardley Gobin), William Wells, Arthur Dixey and John Wells from Bampton, R Brookes from Godley Hill Lancashire, 2 men from Flanborough Sword Team and that still leaves '3 men short'.

A prolific journalist (to earn a living) Mary, refers to the richness of this cultural exchange, a 'living link' again and again, proving that 'the folk song and dance belongs to the people'.

"Another old folk singer who came up from Somerset to see two London girls dance. : He was an old sailor who had lived in many lands and seen many things. He said 'This is the dancing of my heart and I would not have missed the sight for two big apples".." it's what I call clean dancing. .. He then sang us a song "Watchet Sailor", and with this exchange of the arts, we left him."[25]

'An interchange between town and country is what we must look for in the future. The musician will go into the country and will set down for us dance and song from the old folks who live there. The town folk will learn from them and add something to them of their own generation, and of the charm and vivacity of the city, and they, in their turn will teach the young folk of the villages'[26]

On one occasion in 1912, preparing for a performance in Cumberland Market, a company of girls and young men come up from Thaxted, Hull, Boxford, and Manchester, to perform with the London girls. An audience gathers, including a policeman 'a native of one of the country villages from which some of the dances come' also an irish fiddler, awaggoner and family with the girls and boys. 'I realised once more how absolutely this folk dance and song belongs to the people…it is well we realise this to-day with all the forces of wealth and civilisation are arraying themselves against the workers..'

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[25] Mary Neal, Set to Music, P 8.
[26] ibid

39.‘The living link between the present and the past will be the actual dances of these traditional dancers, for they are to be gathered, not from the dancing schools or drawing rooms, but from the factory, and field and workshop.’
She observes the living link between the rural and the urban poor that actively contributes to the revival, or as Prof June Boyce Tillman would argue, between the subjugated knowers or the dispossessed: “Among those who have been marginalised by the dominant culture (for whatever reason-poverty, gender, social class, disability and so on) there is a natural affinity born of the combination of frustration and sadness generated by survival in an inhospitable environment’ [27]

The connections forged day by day between the working classes of town and country are crucial I believe to understanding how the revival ‘blazed across the land’, exploring common ground, and building a new found social capital.

On another trip to the sea-side, Mary cites her achievement for these girls: On hearing the girls linked arm in arm singing one evening she says:
“I, in that moment thrilled through and through by the beauty of the night, and the beauty of life as we saw it in our girls. We lived – *lived* as only those ever live who ‘dream the impossible dream and it comes true’.. we knew that it had been

[27] Prof June Boyce Tillman, Unconventional Wisdoms, to be published 2007.

infinitely worth while; our girls were glad and free; they had escaped the sordidness of their surroundings. *We had conquered".*[28]

Other dynamics were at work in the Club specific to the historic times they were living in:

Image: Picture of Sundial

In addition to holidays by the sea in Littlehampton, girls over the years also spent time at the Surrey home of the Pethick-Lawrences in Dorking. A special house was built to accommodate the Espérance girls, called the Sundial (built by Dunbar Smith, Arts and Craft architect of Mary Ward Centre and Heals). The girls mixed with suffragettes such as Annie Kenney, Constance Lytton, the Pankhursts on such holidays and were often asked to dance at Suffragette gatherings.

IMAGE: Back page of Espérance Book, showing Jessie Kenney (1887-1985) 's signature at the bottom of a list of signatures.

So the 'experiment' involved a political education in women's rights as well. One of the girls, Esther Knowles, the aunt of Mary;s goddaughter Nita Needham, at 14 became Emmeline's secretary and never left her service, becoming guardian of her personal papers and Mary's also.

The Espérance Club crossed the boundaries of social classes. It also became an in-house performance company of *the* hothouse of radical political change in Britain. The daily experiences of the girls could only have fed into the arguments

[28] Mary Neal, Mother Earth

of the suffragettes and their fight for universal suffrage, with its allied campaigns for workers rights, that were transforming Britain socially and culturally by the day.

What do we know of the individual girls that were part of this experiment? If Mary's story is somewhat fragmented, theirs is even more so. Florrie Warren travelled to the US with Mary in 1910 and stayed there to marry and have 3 daughters, 2 are still alive.)
Image of Florrie Warren, Esperance Book.
Image of Thaxted; Blanche and children in Walnut tree Meadow.

With more time, the story of 18 year old sewing girl, Blanche Payling is rewarding to piece together and proves a living link to contemporary practice. At the invitation of Mary via Rev Conrad Noel and his wife Miriam, she travelled alone to Thaxted in Janunary 1911 and taught 3 classes daily to the children and young people from the George Lee's Sweet Factory on Walnut Tree Meadow. She earned 2 guineas and by July of that year and after subsequent visits,Thaxted had a company of 60 strong. Descendants of these original children John Bull, Aurthur Caton and others live on in Thaxted celebrating the Morris weekend every year. Their website talks of a ritual toast to the 'immortal memory' of Cecil Sharp, yet with their advancing centenary in 2011 the Morris Community, with the help of local historian Michael Goatcher, looks to the place where Blanche came from: Glen St on the corner of Cumberland Market where her Club was based.

In an article on The Revival of the Morris Dance[29] Blanche writes about the origins of the Morris and how the revival came about writing with an authority remarkable for someone of her origins and status. She talks about the Espérance Club, the teaching she and others like her do, and the company being now, twenty girls, and a few baby girls between the age of four and seven and six boys. She tackles the thorny issue of the bent of straight leg (which proved the undoing of William Kimber when asked to demonstrate his dancing to both Sharp and Neal)

"It is no small thing for a little London dressmaker to stay in the house, as an honoured guest, of a country squire, and ride in his motor car and write letters home at his study table, and feel at the same time that she too has something to give"[30]

The more I learn about the experiment of the Esperance Club, the more it resembles a youth-based arts organisation with a very contemporary feel. An effective learning environment ahead of its time and similar in many ways to the participatory arts projects we see encouraged today, dedicated to the young and the socially excluded. The Roundhouse Studios in Camden, Project Phakama's theatre work, Contact Theatre in Manchester and so on come to mind. They demonstrate discipline and the sense of personal responsibility of the young people at their core. From the earliest days of the West Mission Club in 1888,

[29] The Country Town, Feb 1911, Vol 1, No 11. Courtesy of Michael Goatcher
[30] Mary Neal, Set To Music 1907.

Mary speaks of a number of girls who took responsibility for positive developments there and where such initiative has taken them. ‘I know what each one of them is doing today’

Shirley Brice Heath, Margery Bailey Professor of English and Dramatic Literature at Stanford, and a linguistic anthropologist is an expert in this field and has studied the characteristics of youth-based arts organisations amongst communities of economic disadvantage.

In Making Learning Work, Brice Heath describes the characteristics of dynamic youth based arts organisations with the capacity to turn young lives around, particularly the lives of young people for whom the arts become a vehicle for their survival from poverty, poor housing, street violence, prejudice, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution and the social ills that can dog the lives of the dispossessed and young. Self organising is at their heart. ‘All the adults can do is provide consistent support, and the strong framework of high demand, professional socialisation, real deadlines, and tough authentic critics’. Projects are creative and collaborative in nature, involving problem solving, working in teams, peer-to-peer education, co-created productions and a quality of performance. The requirement, indeed the chance, to play multiple roles is a given: young people take responsibility for acting, dancing, making music, script writing, and the day-to-day administrative work essential to the group’s maintenance. They have contact with people they wouldn’t otherwise meet. ‘Older members also instruct, coach, mentor, demonstrate, and re-inforce ideas with younger and novice members, laying down the pattern that as individuals

grow through the group, they shape the learning environment that supports group product and performance development'.

Does this not help explain how young Blanche of Cumberland Market, travels with confidence to work professionally as a teacher with no qualifications other than the confidence of her peers, pleasure in dancing and a sense of responsibility to the task.

"True education flowers" Philip Pulman once said 'at the point where delight falls in love with responsibility'.

In other words, Mary knew she was not the sole 'organiser' of the Espérance Club's and its share in the revival's success. The Club had the self-organising energy of the girls that engendered it. Mary would have recognised the very real truth in Sharp's denigration once of their dancing as 'hoydenish'. (hoydenish: unwomanly, saucy, even in some senses whorish). Was it not the reality to the girls' lives that gave the revival movement something of a 'street edge' from which he benefited, just as 'hip hop' dance programmes bring 'street cred' to arts ventures today. Mary Neal's 1912 The Espérance Book, quotes the public's responses to the girls when they visit at length. It's a social revelation to many. Maybe for 'hoydens' read hoodies. They are actually quite nice.

Image: cover of the Espérance Morris Book

The Club benefited not only girls of Blanche's age, but their younger sisters, some as young as 4 or 7 in a spirit of 'equality and comradeship'.

I end on the all important intergenerational learning that was at the heart of the 20 year experiment of the Espérance Club, as it is the emphasis Mary herself places on the source of the revival. She, does not name the girl in question, but she describes the following incident around 1903 or 1904:

"It was at this time that the elder girls of the Club began the work for children which has been such a marked feature of our work ever since. It began in such a tiny way, it has developed in such a wonderful way. A girl of sixteen the eldest of a family of six, with no advantages, no money, but equipped with the good breeding only found, I am sometimes tempted to think, amongst those who have known the depths as well as the heights of society, and equipped with the true woman's desire to help and uplift, came to me and said, "How do you think it would do if I get to the Club early and make some lemonade for the girls, I think it would give 'em courage this hot weather?" I said I thought it was an excellent idea and I lent her half-a-crown for the initial outlay. She used to go every evening after that and make and serve out the lemonade, selling a large glass for a half-penny. When Autumn came again she asked us, "Couldn't I get in some of the children who are always outside when the juniors are let into the Club, some of the other girls would help and we could teach them songs and games?" Again this answer was very emphatically in the affirmative. And so began our "Babies Club" since famous through the land."

Mary was serious when she said ‘there should be nothing about this revival that cannot be understood by the average boy or girl”.

We have to bring to mind all we know about the Espérance Club, to imagine how a cooling glass of lemonade could give ‘courage’. Courage? Courage for what? Is it possible that the energies of the Espérance Club lay in this care for one another to survive in spirit simply from one day to the next? Who would give a hoot about straight or bent legs if getting to the end of the day is what matters? Does not a seed of the revival lie in this reality? Like glasses of lemonade, the spirit of the revival was passed from child to child from 1895-1914. No one wonder they learnt songs and dances so quickly from heart. How else could they have covered so much ground so quickly and with so much fun?

I have scratched the surface on Mary. She acknowledges all experiences and learning she drew on throughout her life took place with the girls in the Club. During the first World War, Mary went to work on the Isle of Dogs, in the pensions office, helping families who had lost breadwinners on the battlefields. After a stay in Sussex, she became a the first female magistrate on a county bench and Sussex became her home. She died in 1944. The day after she died she was set to: over see developments of youth hostels and holiday camps.

She started to write As A Tale That is Told in 1937. It remains unpublished, is in my possession but I hope not for long.

This paper and other celebratory arts events planned over the next few years, begins a process of bringing Mary Neal and the story of The Espérance Club to light.

At a Ring Meeting at Cecil Sharp House in 1938, Major Fryer proposed the toast to 'Miss Neal' instead of the more usual one to Cecil Sharp in honour of Abingdon's first appearance at a Ring Meeting.[31] She later visited the Stow Ring Meeting as guest of honour and was delighted by the Abingdon side dancing all their dances for her to her great pleasure. To conclude my paper, I drink to Miss Neal, the Espérance Club and most important, the unknown lemonade maker, without whom I would probably not be here.

[31] 1959 Article, Thaxted file LN